

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE 57

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW  
March/April 1981

# SABOTAGING THE DISSIDENT PRESS

The untold story of the secret offensive waged by the U.S. government against antiwar publications

by ANGUS MACKENZIE

**T**he American public has learned in the last few years a great deal about the government's surveillance of the left during the Vietnam War era. The report of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (the Church committee) first suggested how widely the government had been involved in planting informants inside New Left groups, propagating false information about these groups, and using a variety of tactics to disrupt their activities. That such tactics were also used on a vast scale against dissenting magazines and the underground press, however, has not been reported in a comprehensive way. The story has lain scattered in a hundred places. Now, documents obtained by editors and writers under the Freedom of Information Act, and interviews with former intelligence agents, make it possible, for the first time, to put together a coherent — though not necessarily complete — account of the federal government's systematic and sustained violation of the First Amendment during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The government's offensive against the underground press primarily involved three agencies — the CIA, the FBI, and the Army. In many cases, their

activities stemmed from what they could claim were legitimate concerns. The CIA's Operation CHAOS, for example, was set up to look into the foreign connections of domestic dissidents; however, it soon exceeded its mandate and became part of the broad attack on the left and on publications that were regarded as creating a climate disruptive of the war effort. At its height, the government's offensive may have affected more than 150 of the roughly 500 underground publications that became the nerve centers of the antiwar and countercultural movements.

A telling example of this offensive was the harassment of Liberation News Service, which, when opposition to the Vietnam War was building, played a key role in keeping the disparate parts of the antiwar movement informed. By 1968, the FBI had assigned three informants to penetrate the news service, while nine other informants regularly reported on it from the outside. Their reports were forwarded to the U.S. Army's Counterintelligence Branch, where an analyst kept tabs on LNS founders Ray Mungo and Marshall Bloom, and to the Secret Service, the Internal Revenue Service, the Navy, the Air Force, and the CIA. The FBI also attempted to discredit and break up the news service through various counterintelligence activities, such as trying to make LNS appear to be an FBI front, to create friction among staff members, and to burn down the LNS office in Washington while the staff slept upstairs. Before long, the CIA, too, joined the offensive; one of its recruits began filing reports on the movements of LNS staff members while reporting for the underground press to establish his cover as an underground journalist.

The CIA was apparently the first federal agency to plan actions against domestic publications. Its Operation CHAOS grew out of an investigation of *Ramparts* magazine, which during the

rectorate of Plans (its "dirty tricks" department) assigned to counterintelligence agent Richard Ober the task of "pulling together information on *Ramparts*, including any evidence of subversion [and] devising proposals for counteraction." While those proposals remain secret, several details relating to the *Ramparts* operation have become known.

**I**n February 1, an associate of Ober's met with Thomas Terry, assistant to the commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service, to request that the IRS review *Ramparts'* corporate tax returns to determine who the magazine's backers were. Terry agreed to do so. Subsequently, Ober's office provided the IRS with "detailed informant information" about *Ramparts* backers, whom the IRS was requested to investigate for possible tax violations. Ober's investigation of the magazine uncovered no "evidence of subversion" or ties to foreign intelligence agencies. By August, however, it had produced a computerized listing of several hundred Americans, about fifty of whom were the subject of detailed files.

In August, too, Ober's mandate was expanded as the CIA, responding to pressure from President Johnson, ini-

Angus Mackenzie is a free-lance writer in northern California. Editorial assistance was provided by Jay Peterzell of the Center for National Security Studies in Washington, which also provided research assistance. The article was financed in part by the Fund for Peace.